Calendar No. 153

98TH CONGRESS
1st Session

SENATE

REPORT
No. 98-97

AUTHORIZING THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION TO PURCHASE LAND IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY, ARIZ.

MAY 16, 1983.—Ordered to be printed

Mr. MATHIAS, from the Committee on Rules and Administration submitted the following

REPORT

[To accompany S. 930]

The Committee on Rules and Administration to which was referred the bill (S. 930) to authorize the Smithsonian Institution to purchase land in Santa Cruz County, Ariz., having considered the same, reports favorably thereon with an amendment and recommends that the bill as amended do pass.

PURPOSE

The Smithsonian Institution maintains and operates a major astronomical observatory on Mt. Hopkins, near Amado, Arizona. Land has been used under a lease arrangement for support buildings. The Smithsonian needs to purchase four acres so that permanent and more suitable facilities can be constructed. S. 930 authorizes the purchase of land and the appropriation of $150,000 for that purpose.

BACKGROUND

The Fred Lawrence Whipple Observatory is located on Mount Hopkins, 18 miles from the town of Amado, Arizona. It occupies a 4,744 acre site leased from the National Forest Service and is the largest field installation of the Institution's Astrophysical Observatory. Formerly known as the Mount Hopkins Observatory, it was renamed in 1981 in honor of Fred Lawrence Whipple, a noted planetary expert, space science pioneer, and former director of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory under whose leadership the Arizona facility was established.

Since October, 1968 the observatory has been the site of experiments requiring extremely dark skies, dry climate, and good "optical

S683-3

seeing". Research activities include optical, infrared, and spectroscopic observations of extragalactic, stellar, and planetary bodies; gamma-ray and cosmic-ray astronomy; solar energy research; and environmental studies. The observatory's instruments are located on a half-long ridge at the 7,600 foot level and include 1.5m and 61cm reflecting telescopes, a 10m optical array, a Baker-Nunn satellite tracking camera (now inactive), and other telescopes and meteorological instruments. In addition, the 8,500-foot summit of Mount Hopkins is the site of a large multiple mirror telescope (MMT) jointly built and operated by the Smithsonian and the University of Arizona for optical and infrared astronomy. The MMT has been described as "one of the finest telescopes, at one of the best sites in the world."

The Whipple Observatory has developed in the last decade from a small, field observing station of the Smithsonian into one of the Nation's foremost astronomical research facilities, attracting yearly to the Santa Cruz Valley hundreds of public visitors and scores of professional astronomers from around the world. The current annual operating budget is approximately $1.5 million, and its permanent scientific and support staff now numbers 35 people, most of whom are drawn from local communities.

For the past thirteen years the Smithsonian has leased four acres of land in Amado, at the base of Mount Hopkins, as the base camp and staging area for research activities on the mountain. Two acres are owned by the Tubac School District and two acres by private owners. On the property is a fifty to sixty-year old one-level stucco school building and residence which have been converted to office use. Also on the property are various automotive service, repair, and storage buildings with gravel parking and driveway areas.

A small, informal Visitor's Center in the school building includes displays on the history of astronomy and audio-visual presentations describing Smithsonian research. A full-time Public Affairs Specialist is assigned to the observatory, and residents of nearby communities also serve as volunter staff members greeting visitors, answering telephone queries, and responding to mail requests for information.

Regularly scheduled guided bus tours of the mountain-top facilities are provided at modest cost to the public nine months of the year in cooperation with the University of Arizona. Special free tours are also provided for schools and other publicly-supported groups. Also in cooperation with the University, the observatory supports a school program at the Flandrau Planetarium in which students of all ages from the Tucson area school system are given an introduction to astronomy and space sciences.

The operation of a large astronomical observatory such as the Whipple Observatory requires instrumentation laboratories, computation and drafting facilities, darkrooms, tool shops, vehicle maintenance and storage areas, space for the receipt and transshipment of equipment and supplies, administrative offices, and access to major transportation routes in order to coordinate activities in several locations. Furthermore, the increased public interest in astronomy nationwide, combined with interest in the unusual MMT, has meant a growing demand for access to the observatory and a need for expanded facilities to serve the public.

Smithsonian ownership of the Amado site, located midway between the cities of Tucson and Nogales, would allow the erection of permanent facilities in a carefully planned and coordinated fashion that would respect the integrity of the neighboring community and protect the local environment. Because current and projected needs of the observatory necessitate a larger headquarters facility, leasehold improvement is not economical. Of eight sites studied and analyzed, the Amado site is preferred by the Smithsonian Institution because it is accessible and visible from Interstate 19; contains all necessary utilities; is flat and conducive to the necessary development; and can be developed most cost efficiently with the least amount of disruption to present operations.

COMMITTEE ACTION

On April 20, 1983, the Committee on Rules and Administration held hearings on S. 840. Testimony was received from S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

COMMITTEE FINDINGS

Current and projected needs of the Fred Lawrence Whipple Observatory necessitate a larger, permanent, and more suitable headquarters facility for which leasehold improvement would not be economical. The Smithsonian Institution should be authorized to purchase land so that such facilities can be constructed.

COMMITTEE AMENDMENT

The Committee amendment strikes the "such sums" language in the bill and inserts the specific amount of $150,000.

COST ESTIMATE

Cost estimates were not received from the Congressional Budget Office in time for their inclusion in the Committee's report. Upon their receipt, the Committee shall report them to the Senate for publication in the Congressional Record.

REGULATORY IMPACT STATEMENT

In accordance with paragraph 11(b) of rule XXVI of the Standing Rules of the Senate, the Committee on Rules and Administration does not consider that enactment of S. 930 would have any regulatory impact.

CHANGES IN EXISTING LAW

There are no changes in existing law.

○